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Who Should Have Known Yurchenko Was a Problem?

By STEPHEN ENGELBERG

WASHINGTON — There was an extraordinary round of fingerpointing last week over the case of Vitaly S. Yurchenko, the erstwhile Soviet defector. As American intelligence analysts attempted to determine whether Mr. Yurchenko's return to the Soviet Union signified a change in heart or the success of a complex Russian plot, various Government agencies were blaming one another, the Congress and the press for mishandling his case.

The Yurchenko affair is one of several cases that appear to be pushing the intelligence community toward a broad reassessment of procedures.

For instance, the spy ring led by John A. Walker Jr., the retired Navy man, has encouraged the military services to search for better ways to protect their secrets. In Norfolk, Va., last week, Mr. Walker's brother Arthur was given a sentence of life in prison and a fine of $250,000. It was the stiffest penalty so far against the Walkers. In a plea bargain contingent on John Walker's cooperation in intensive debriefings on his 17-year espionage career, he received a sentence of life, while his son, Michael, was given 25 years.

And the espionage charges against Richard W. Miller, the former F.B.I. agent, have prompted several leading members of Congress to question the bureau's counter-intelligence operations. Mr. Miller's trial ended earlier this month with a deadlocked jury.

In a Moscow press conference last week, Mr. Yurchenko revealed new details about his purported kidnapping by the C.I.A. Among other things, he charged that the agency had tried to conceal its tortures by forcing him to play golf and sunbathe so he would appear healthy. American officials denied his account, but several officials speculated the Russians would use the allegations that Mr. Yurchenko's rights had been violated to counter President Reagan's expected complaints about Soviet abuses at the summit meeting in Geneva.

In Washington, the C.I.A. took steps to respond to critics in Congress and the Administration who have questioned its performance. William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that his agency had erred in sharing too many details with Capitol Hill committees, implying that the flood of publicity about Mr. Yurchenko had sprung from Congressional sources.

In a stinging letter later in the week, Mr. Casey raised broader questions about Congressional oversight, accusing members of Congress of compromising intelligence sources and levelling "off the cuff" criticism.

The letter was addressed to Senator Dave Durenberger, Republican of Minnesota and chairman of the Senate intelligence panel. Mr. Durenberger said in a statement that he supported Mr. Casey and the agency and that his comments at a luncheon meeting with reporters had been misquoted. The committee's vice chairman, Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, termed the Casey letter "unfortunate" and said it appeared that the director was pushing to return to the "good old days" when there was no Congressional oversight.

Some Administration officials suggested that Mr. Yurchenko had been frightened by press coverage of his case, a reaction they said was heightened when the Federal Bureau of Investigation showed the K.G.B. officer clippings of news articles about him.

At the same time, some F.B.I. agents were grumbling about the C.I.A.'s handling of Mr. Yurchenko. They argued that the intelligence agency was to blame for not keeping a tighter rein on his defection and subsequent revelations. Officials say Mr. Yurchenko told the C.I.A. of his hopes to disappear and start a new life on the West Coast without ever being identified as a defector.

At the F.B.I., senior officials have insisted their relations with the agency "have never been better." Philip Parker, the deputy assistant director of the bureau's intelligence division, said recently, "I don't know where we could improve things." Asked about bickering between the two agencies over the years, Mr. Parker added: "Let's just say the guys on the street always had a good relationship."

Even before Mr. Yurchenko announced his return to the Soviet Union, however, there were signs that the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. were not in complete harmony. One of those identified by Mr. Yurchenko as an agent of the K.G.B. was Edward Lee Howard, a former C.I.A. officer who fled the country after being charged with espionage. According to court papers, a year before Mr. Howard's name surfaced as a suspect, he told C.I.A. colleagues that he was contemplating spying for the Soviet Union. That information, officials say, was never turned over to the F.B.I., the only agency permitted to investigate cases of spying within the United States. After Mr. Howard was identified, he managed to elude the F.B.I.

The Senate Select Committee said last week that it had asked each Government agency involved in the Yurchenko case for a report.

Meanwhile, there were further repercussions in another case that has drawn considerable Congressional attention. The Commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Alan C. Nelson, said he expected the agency to discipline two border patrol agents who last month forced Miroslav Medved, a Soviet sailor, to return to the grain ship from which he had jumped.

With the ship under way for a Russian port, a Soviet newspaper asserted last week that Mr. Medved had fallen off his freighter and become "disoriented." And in the Port of Houston, Paul Firica, a Rumanian seaman who fled a freighter taking on cargo, was granted asylum in the United States. Mr. Firica was the second Rumanian to jump ship in two weeks. "It happens all the time," said Verne Jervis, a spokesman for the Immigration service. "The only thing different is we had a Russian seaman jump who made big news."